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ABSTRACT

Although alternate definitions for information literacy have been developed by educational institutions, professional organizations and individuals, they are likely to stem from the definition offered in the Final Report of the American Library Association (ALA) Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: "to be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information." This ERIC Digest describes the evolution of the concept of information literacy, and goes on to discuss the following: the three predominating themes in research on information literacy; the new workplace of the future; national and state standards; K-12 educational reform and restructuring; information literacy efforts in K-12 and higher education; and information technology as the enabler of information literacy. (AEF)

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Information Literacy
ERIC Digest
February 1999

By:

Eric Plotnick

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Information Literacy

by Eric Plotnick

This Digest is based on *Information Literacy: Essential Skills for the Information Age* by Kathleen L. Spitzer with Michael B. Eisenberg & Carrie A.Lowe

Definition of Information Literacy

Although alternate definitions for information literacy have been developed by educational institutions, professional organizations and individuals, they are likely to stem from the definition offered in the Final Report of the American Library Association (ALA) Presidential Committee on Information Literacy, "To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information"(1989, p. 1). Since information may be presented in a number of formats, the term *information* applies to more than just the printed word. Other literacies such as visual, media, computer, network, and basic literacies are implicit in information literacy.

The Evolution of a Concept

The seminal event in the development of the concept of information literacy was the establishment of the ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy whose final report outlined the importance of the concept. The ALA Presidential Committee precipitated the formation of the National Forum on Information Literacy, a coalition of more than 65 national organizations, that seeks to disseminate the concept. The development of information literacy in K–12 education began with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. This was soon followed by *Educating Students to Think: The Role of the School Library Media Program* (1986), a concept paper outlining the role of the library and the role of information resources in K–12 education. Kulthau's *Information Skills for an Information Society: A Review of Research* (1987) included library skills and computer skills in the definition of information literacy. The American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) 1988 publication, *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*, and its 1998 publication *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* emphasize the notion that the mission of the school library media program is "to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information."

Information Literacy Research

Three themes predominate in research on information literacy.

- Information literacy is a process. Information literacy skills must be taught in the context of the overall process.
- To be successful, information literacy skills instruction must be integrated with the curriculum and reinforced both within and outside of the educational setting.
- Information literacy skills are vital to future success.

An Economic Perspective

The change from an economy based on labor and capital to one based on information requires information literate workers who will know how to interpret information.

- Barner's (1996) study of the new workplace indicates significant changes will take place in the future. Information technology is decentralizing the work force. The work force will be more diverse and the economy will increasingly be more global. The use of temporary workers will increase. These changes will require that workers possess information literacy skills.
- The SCANS (1991) report identifies the skills necessary for the workplace of the future. Rather than report to a hierarchical management structure, workers of the future will be required to actively participate in the management of the company and contribute to its success. The workplace will require workers who possess skills beyond those of reading, writing and arithmetic.

National and State Standards

With the passage of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994), subject matter organizations were able to obtain funding to develop standards in their respective subject areas. Information literacy skills are implicit in the National Education Goals and national content standards documents.

- Three of the eight National Education Goals demonstrate the critical nature of information literacy to an information society: Goal 1: School Readiness; Goal 3: Student Achievement and Citizenship; Goal 6: Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning.
- An analysis of national content standards documents reveals that they all focus on lifelong learning, the ability to think critically, and on the use of new and existing information for problem solving.
- Individual states are creating initiatives to ensure that students attain information literacy skills by the time they graduate from high school. Kentucky (1995), Utah (1996), and California (1994) are but three examples of states that have publications depicting these initiatives.
- National content standards, state standards, and information literacy skills terminology may vary, but all have common components relating to information literacy.

K-12 Education Restructuring

Educational reform and restructuring make information literacy skills a necessity as students seek to construct their own knowledge and create their own understandings.

- Educators are selecting various forms of resource-based learning (authentic learning, problem-based learning and work-based learning) to help students focus on the process and to help students learn from the content. Information literacy skills are necessary components of each.
- The process approach to education is requiring new forms of student assessment. Students demonstrate their skills, assess their own learning, and evaluate the processes by which this

learning has been achieved by preparing portfolios, learning and research logs, and using rubrics.

Information Literacy Efforts in K–12 Education

Information literacy efforts are underway on individual, local, and regional bases.

- Imaginative Web based information literacy tutorials are being created and integrated with curriculum areas, or being used for staff development purposes.
- Library media programs are fostering information literacy by integrating the presentation of information literacy skills with curriculum at all grade levels.
- Information literacy efforts are not being limited to the library field, but are also being employed by regional educational consortia.
- Parents are encouraging their children to develop information literacy skills at home by contacting KidsConnect, the Internet help and referral service for K–12 students. Parents are also helping students work through the information problem solving process as they assist their children with their homework.

Information Literacy in Higher Education

The inclusion of information competencies as a graduation requirement is the key that will fully integrate information literacy into the curricula of academic institutions.

- Information literacy instruction in higher education can take a variety of forms: stand-alone courses or classes, online tutorials, workbooks, course-related instruction, or course-integrated instruction.
- State-wide university systems and individual colleges and universities are undertaking strategic planning to determine information competencies, to incorporate instruction in information competence throughout the curriculum and to add information competence as a graduation requirement for students.
- Academic library programs are preparing faculty to facilitate their students' mastery of information literacy skills so that the faculty can in turn provide information literacy learning experiences for the students enrolled in their classes.

Technology and Information Literacy

Information Technology is the great enabler. It provides, for those who have access to it, an extension of their powers of perception, comprehension, analysis, thought, concentration, and articulation through a range of activities that include: writing, visual images, mathematics, music, physical movement, sensing the environment, simulation, and communication (Carpenter, 1989, p. 2).

Technology, in all of its various forms, offers users the tools to access, manipulate, transform, evaluate, use, and present information.

- Technology in schools includes computers, televisions, video cameras, video editing equipment, and TV studios.
- Two approaches to technology in K–12 schools are technology as the *object* of instruction approach, and technology as the *tool* of instruction approach.
- Schools are starting to incorporate technology skills instruction in the context of information literacy skills.
- Technology is changing the way higher education institutions are offering instruction.
- The use of the Internet is being taught the contexts of subject area curricula and the overall information literacy process.
- There is some empirical indication that students who use technology as a tool may become better at managing information, communicating, and presenting ideas.

Conclusion

"In this next century, an "educated" graduate will no longer be defined as one who has absorbed a certain body of factual information, but as one who knows how to find, evaluate, and apply needed information" (Breivik, 1998, p.2). Our ability to be information literate depends on our willingness to be lifelong learners as we are challenged to master new technologies that will forever alter the landscape of information.

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